

## **I'm Gonna Keep All My Promises** by **vanillacupcake13**

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**Summary:**

Nothing ever stays normal in Hawkins.

But it will all be okay, because we're together.

Created for NaNoWriMo 2017

# 1. Hold My Hand For Forever

## Author's Note:

This is my first ever real fanfiction and first nanowrimo so I'm sorry for any mistakes and inconsistencies. Constructive criticism and general comments are very very welcome!  
Hope you'll enjoy!

*Nothing* will be normal again.

Mike knew that, he realised it from the moment El killed the Demogorgon, almost two years ago. And yet here he was - not regretting a single thing that happened, 'cause it brought him Eleven. The same girl he was now waiting for in the sunny and warm parking lot of Hawkins High School. It was the first day of high school and the first day of school *ever* for El. Even though a full year hasn't passed yet, Hopper thought that starting school at the same time with everyone else would make the most sense and bring less attention towards her.

With that in mind, Mike and the rest of the party had helped her study over the summer so she would have the same knowledge as they did. It was a lot of hard work and it did take them a while but El was smart, and determined, and curious and it helped a lot. Most of the time they studied at the Hopper residence and on some very rare occasions in Mike's basement and sometimes even Nancy would join them to help with harder subjects. It all payed off and by now it felt like El never even skipped school. And even though Mike knew El was anxious, he also knew she was as ready as anyone could be and he would always be there to steady her and help her in whatever way he could.

In the corner of his eye, further in the parking lot, he saw Lucas hugging Max. They stood behind some cars, obviously putting some distance between them and Billy, who, although didn't do anything physical, still harboured hard feelings towards his stepsister's boyfriend and friends.

Mike's attention was brought back to the present as Will got out of Jonathan's car next to him. He waved bye to his brother and smiled at Mike. They didn't get to see each other very often as his mom was

as overprotective as always, but the party would always visit him or have him join them in Mike's basement. They made sure he felt involved and loved and cared for, like good friends would.

As Will made his way towards the school entrance, Mike started fidgeting. There wasn't that much time left and he wasn't really sure where their classroom was and then there was a little ball of anxiety starting to squirm in his belly. When he finally saw Hopper's car turning into the parking lot, instead of calming down, the ball just became bigger and squirmier.

Ignoring his anxiety, the boy smiled and waved at Eleven. She was sitting in the passenger seat, her brown curls barely contained, in a blue dress with short sleeves, her little brown backpack on her lap. She had a little black handkerchief tied around her wrist, hiding the tattoo. Mike watched as El said goodbye to her adoptive dad and nodded his head as Hopper sternly acknowledged Mike's existence. It seemed he wished her a good day as El quickly hugged him and jumped out of the car.

When her big brown eyes met Mike's, he felt his heart flutter and the ball of anxiety slowly unfurled until it was gone.

"You look very pretty," he smiled at her as El approached him and the two shared a quick hug. "Ready?"

"No," El smiled at Mike as her hand found his and her fingers curled around his. "But you're here."

Mike squeezed her hand and smiled and led El towards the school and towards her new life.

The classroom was almost full, with just a few minutes left until the bell. Dustin saved them seats front and center, in the second row, with Max, Lucas and Dustin right in front of them and Will to the right of Mike. Their homeroom teacher was a nice lady and while she talked about useless things like what to expect from high school and why it's important and such, Mike slowly blanked out. He knew that Hopper made sure El had the lessons with at least one person from their party at any time, mostly with Mike, and he was glad for that. He was sure that after a good week or so everyone's attention towards the new girl would wane and it would all settled down. For now though, he definitely heard some whispers in the back and felt some interested looks thrown towards their backs. He only hoped that two years and a different name changed El just enough for noone to notice the similarity with his supposed cousin.

El. Now she was *Jane*. And even though he knew it was her real name and that he was supposed to call her that in public, both in his mind and in private he liked calling her El. While everyone else in the party slowly eased into *Jane*, he just seemed not able to move on. And El never seemed upset about the nickname Mike kept. It was one of their little things.

“Jane Hopper?” The teacher seemed to have finally moved on to attendance and Mike lightly elbowed El. “Say ‘*Here*’” he mouthed to her and she did.

“You seem new,” continued teacher with an encouraging smile. “Would you like to tell us about yourself?”

Thankfully, they had expected this and El knew what to say.

“I like waffles,” she smiled. “And, um, watching TV shows? And listening to music, I guess.”

*So basic and vague*, Mike chuckled privately.

“That’s... nice. I see your last name - is chief Hopper connected to you or..?”

“He’s my uncle. I’m staying with him for now.”

“Well, how great of you to join us! Hope you like it here in Hawkins. Ok, moving on, Jon Kelson?”

El turned her head towards Mike and he gave her an encouraging smile. “*You did great*,” he whispered and watched her expression soften. It was weird, just being with El without needing to fight monsters or save his friends. It felt... nice. Mike supposed he’d be happy spending his whole life like this. *Don’t jinx it*, he thought as the lesson kept going. He glanced at Will. It seemed like the poor kid just couldn’t catch a break and Mike hoped that this year he would stay happy and safe. Will deserved it. He watched him lift his head up from his doodle and smile at his friend.

*Yeah, I hope this year’s good. We all deserve to finally be happy.*

First day at school flied by and soon they all were free. As the weather was amazing, with sun as bright as ever, the gang realised that some good ice cream was in need and a plan to talk Will’s mom and Hopper into letting them hang out in the city was devised. Surprisingly, Mrs. Bryers was pretty quick to agree, as long as El was there and the only person they really needed to convince was Hopper. After promising him a hundred times to stay out of trouble and the center of attention, El was begrudgingly given three dollars and Hopper left with her friends and a warning to them.

As the party moved towards the town's center to "*the best damn ice cream parlour*" (according to Dustin), they made sure to keep El in the middle of their group, as hidden as possible. As they all chatted and gossiped about the teachers and planned what flavours they'll get, El's warm fingers found Mike's hand and she softly smiled at him. He smiled back.

"So, did you like it? School?"

"It's... ok. Loud," El glanced at the guys in front of them, loudly laughing and screaming and having fun. "But kind of... fun."

"I'm glad," Mike squeezed her hand. "And I'm sure you'll do great."

They held hands a lot. It helped them remember - everything is okay and they have each other's back. They're safe and together and everything is *okay*. The contact was grounding and needed, if Mike ever admitted that. Right by the end of all events, when they all returned home and tried to put their lives back together, to somehow assemble any sort of normal, he would get nightmares. Nightmares, in which El never came back from the gate, in which they failed to escape from the demodogs, in which the Mind Flayer took Will from them. They felt very real and oh so tangible. And when it still felt like a dream sometimes, that's when he needed something to keep him in the present, to not let his mind wander off towards the bad things. So he would weave his fingers between El's tighter and tug her closer. He never truly told El or anyone else, and yet she was always there when he needed her and Mike was so glad. He was fine with being saved as long as it was El.

When they finally got to the ice cream parlour and picked their flavours, Mike saw all those options El never even knew existed overwhelming her, so he offered to buy it for them both and she nodded happily, going to sit with Max, who already got hers while the rest of the boys argued about the ice cream flavour bests and worsts and inbetweens. Quickly after the closing of the gate, when the whole party got a chance to hang out, El warmed up to Max and they became pretty close friends, as the only girls in the group. Mike pushed between Dustin and Lucas and got them two vanilla ice cream cones with chocolate syrup. Offering one to El, he watched her face transform as she slowly tasted the creamy goodness. Her eyes widened and a smile grew on her face as she looked back at Mike.

"Tasty," El murmured and attacked the ice cream. Giggling, Mike dug into his ice cream as well. He was happy.

"Is someone new moving to our neighbour's house?" Karen frowned as she stopped her dishwashing momentarily and looked out the window as a big moving truck stopped right by the Dellers' house. They didn't even mention moving especially since they loved Hawkins so much.

"I guess," Ted mused, turning yet another page of his newspaper. Karen sighed. It felt like life was just slipping by, with all these things she somehow missed.

"Suppose I should make some housewarming cookies?" Mrs. Wheeler turned her attention back to the plate in her hands, her mind already on what she could cook for her new neighbours. Gotta make that first impression sweet.

"If you do, save some for me," Ted grumbled half-heartedly.

A car stopped outside their house, which Karen assumed to be Nancy's ride.

"I'm back!" She was right. Smiling, she finished up her work and turned around.

"How was school, sweetie?"

"Like always, I guess," Nancy shrugged and grabbed an apple from the kitchen table. "Mary's having a little get together for the new school year tomorrow. I'm thinking of going."

"Oh, sure, just don't stay out of trouble," as Nancy hummed in agreement on her way upstairs, Karen gathered ingredients for the chocolate chip cookies. Time to be a good neighbour.

Even though she was reading a book, Reeva still could see her new neighbour coming towards her house with a plate of something through the big windows. *Oh, God.* She hated neighbours like that - noisy middle-aged ladies, mostly moms, ignored by their husbands and children, so they felt like they always had to pretend to be sweet to your face and then talk shit behind your back. Reeva didn't really care for liars and bootlickers. She hated tiny towns and would rather never have stepped in Hawkins again, but the reasons were important enough for her to stay. And, hey, if she *needed* to eat some cookies or pie or whatever for her neighbour to be happy and leave her alone, she was ready to do that.

As the doorbell rang, Reeva slowly got up. Opening her door to the brown hair lady, the teenager smirked.

“Hi!” *Oh no*, Reeva already hated her voice. “I see you’re our new neighbour! I’m Karen Wheeler, I live right next door. Hope that the move is going smoothly.”

Was it even possible to dislike a person’s smile that much that quickly?

“It’s ok. Thanks for the pastries. I think. I’ll be sure to tell dad you visited.”

Karen’s faltering face as Reeva closed the door in her face was hilarious and she couldn’t help but smile. The cookies tasted ok, Reeva supposed. She might even learn to deal with all this.

## 2. There Are Clouds On The Edges Of The Sky

The first week passed in such an anxious hurry that when the second week of the school year was finished, the weekend found the party still in the haze of *new* - new school, new rules, new routines, new *everything* . This uncharted territory had them all both excited and nervous and yet it felt good. Mike deemed this is what their *normal* was now and, honestly, he was perfectly fine with it. He'd catch a ride to school with Nancy, Jonathan and Will in the morning, then wait for El in the parking lot. They'd eat their lunches huddled together, with their shoulders and knees touching and elbows in each other's laps and laugh with their friends. They'd do their homework together after the lessons or during free periods in the library and sometimes El would put her head on Mike's shoulder while she read and they'd hold hands under the table. Mike would write her short sweet notes during class and El would keep them in her brand new binder that they all signed. Will even drew a small doodle of her and Mike in the corner, holding hands with a little heart border and sometimes Mike would catch El's fingers softly brushing against it with a small smile on her face. Somehow his heart managed to flutter every single time he saw her smiling or laughing - which she did so much nowadays and he was so pleased about being the reason most of the time. And when sometimes her eyes, full of that childish happiness and adoration, would meet his, it felt like he would be the first teenager to have a heart attack. *Well...*

"Hey, Dustin," Mike whispered to his friend across the library table.

"Hey. *Hey!*"

"What?" Dustin finally lifted his head. Mike put his history textbook down and leaned forward.

"Do you think a teenager ever had a heart attack?"

"I mean," Dustin furrowed his brows. "Maybe? I never thought about it, but it is possible," Mike hummed in agreement. "Why are you asking?"

"I dunno. Just felt curious, I guess," Mike leaned back and his friend suspiciously looked at the table where lied an *almost* started history book.

"Shouldn't you be reading about Middle Ages or something?"

"I should," with a sigh, Mike let his eyes wander towards the girl on his right, her attention engrossed in the physics textbook while



intensely writing down notes. Even though El took on an intense course over the summer to catch up with her friends, school still was bit of a struggle. It was definitely getting easier with time though. It had to, with all her determination and will to do *good*. To make them proud.

As El's pen continued to vigorously scribble her messy handwriting on the notebook, Mike couldn't help but smile. She surely made *him* proud.

"That new girl is staring at you," Jonathan quietly mused to Nancy. They were sitting on the hood of his car, sharing turkey sandwiches in a sunny parking lot.

"I know," she swallowed the last bite. "She's been staring at me the *whole day*. Apparently, we have a lot of lessons together."

"Do you know her?" Nancy grasped Jonathan's hand and rubbed her thumb over his knuckles.

"Not really, she never said a word to me. But I'm pretty sure she's my new neighbour. Hope she's not watching me through windows too," Nancy chuckled. Jonathan narrowed his eyes.

"That's a bit... creepy. Do you think she's one of *them*?"

"Says Mr. Creepster," she smiled at him. "And I don't think so, no. But I do think I should talk to her."

As Nancy slid down onto the ground, Jonathan followed her and gripped her warm hand tighter.

They kept holding hands while Nancy crossed the parking lot to where the new student was standing, with her boyfriend half a step behind her. Last year, Steve had graduated and now everyone seemed to have forgotten all the love triangle drama. The couple in question could not be happier to be away from the attention - all they wanted was a quiet last year at school. A *normal* last year in high school.

"Hey," Nancy said cheerily as she stood in front of her new neighbour. "I'm Nancy Wheeler. I think I'm your new neighbour? And, um, this is Jonathan."

He lifted his hand as the stranger brushed some hair away from her face. The look her dark green eyes bore was way too intense for him to feel comfortable.

"Reeva. But people call me Ree, I guess." She turned her gaze towards Nancy. Even though Ree was a whole head smaller than Jonathan, she didn't look frail at all.

"Nice to meet you," Nancy smiled at her and discreetly elbowed her boyfriend who was just standing there with an uncomfortable look on his face.

"Yeah," he murmured just as Ree said, "Same."

She moved away from the tree she was leaning on and sweetly smiled at them.

"I appreciate you guys greeting me. Seems that Hawkins isn't *too* fond of newcomers," Slowly walking towards the school, Ree threw over her shoulder a "See you later!" and disappeared between the students, slowly spilling into the school as their lunch break was coming to a close.

"She seems sweet," Nancy turned to Jonathan with a soft expression, but he frowned.

"And quick to leave. I don't like her."

"I know you don't like meeting new people, but I'm sure she's a nice girl. Maybe she's a bit shy, we did put her on the spot. And, you know, it looks like she needs some friends, so..."

Jonathan knew he couldn't resist Nancy's puppy eyes so he didn't even look at her face. And yet, even though he was not sure if it was a good decision or not, he nodded *yes*. After all, it is the last year of high school. And having friends means having fun.

"Ha! I knew it," Grinning, Nancy threw her arms around him and kissed Jonathan's cheek. He squeezed her middle and lifted her up slightly, earning a cute giggle right into his ear. "We should get moving, yeah?"

"Should we?" He kissed her hair and didn't let go when his girlfriend playfully struggled in his hug.

"Yes, we *should*. I don't wanna be late to Mrs. Grumpyface lesson."

"Oh, nobody wants that," Jonathan shook his head and pursed his lips, still not letting Nancy go. "I guess I'll just have to carry you, so you're there in time."

Nancy whined "*Jonathan!*"

"OK, OK, let's go."

He didn't let go of her hand.

When Steve came back to the Hawkins, this time as a junior police officer, he was pretty sure that out of everyone, Dustin was the happiest to see him again. The Harringtons weren't too rejoiced with

his career choice but they agreed that it was a solid decision on his part. If Steve was completely honest, if not for Hopper, he wouldn't have even thought about joining the police force. Jim found him a couple days before his graduation and asked about his future plans, like he had been thinking about this for a while. When the teenager admitted being declined by his top uni choices, Hopper offered him the idea of helping to continue protecting the town. The chief wasn't gonna be in the force forever, and having someone else in the station who knows about all the weird stuff in their little town sounded like a good idea. And it really was. Steve wasn't absolutely sure that they could finally lead a normal life, even if he hoped for it. And the Hawkins' youth really grew on him. If he stayed, especially as a policeman, he could keep on taking care of them and continue being a bigger brother to Dustin.

Steve never had any siblings or younger friends. His relationship with his father wasn't the most perfect one either. Maybe that's what pushed him to care about Dustin, who also lacked a fatherly figure. And being a big brother was pretty fun. Besides, he genuinely wanted Dustin to be happy so, in hindsight, he really should have seen his stay in Hawkins. How could he abandon his little brother during the years when Steve being there for him would be the most needed.

Nonetheless, he still was away at the police academy for almost a year and over the time everyone clearly missed him. The whole gang, with Nancy and Jonathan and the-ever-present-parents Hopper and Mrs. Byers even threw him a small surprise party. And looking at the loving faces of his friends, Steve finally realised that he made the best choice he could. They were his family, brought together by unfortunate events, but family still, and staying with them made him happy as happy can be.

The party was in the Byers residence, mostly cause Joyce offered to make the snacks, and the atmosphere was kept light - with all the music and chatter that filled the room, it seemed like everyone was having fun. Steve and Jonathan made amends around Christmas time and became fast friends. Steve had moved on and Nancy looked happy and *in love* and he cared enough to wish for that happiness to stay. So the trio had a lot of fun hanging out together as the tension between them slowly dissipated until it was completely gone.

After saying his thanks and talking to everyone and somehow making the kids leave him alone (how can they have *so many* questions?), Steve decided to get some fresh air.

Outside he found Hopper, leaning on one of the white supports, sporting a cigarette in his mouth.

"Hey, kiddo. How's the party?"

"It's okay," Steve smiled, as he leaned on another column in front of the chief. "Dustin has a lot of questions. About *everything*."

"He missed you lots," Hopper puffed out the smoke towards the darkening sky. "But he was so excited too. Kept talking 'bout how cool it's gonna be, to have a best friend-police officer."

"That is pretty cool for a freshman, I guess," Steve laughed. The evening breeze felt good, flowing through his hair and calming him down.

"You know, I'm quite glad you're some sort of big brother to him now. I guess, um, he needed something like that," his new boss offered him a slight smile. "And you gave him that, so, good job."

"I suppose I needed something like that too," he mused. "Something to keep me grounded, to take care off. Maybe I should have babysitted as a teenager more. I bet i would have made a killing."

Hopper laughed together with Steve.

"Yeah, yeah, says the one who got forced to set fire to some tunnels by the same gang of thirteen year olds he was supposed to keep out of danger."

"Hey!" Steve glared at him. "They were *fine and dandy* afterwards, weren't they?"

"Mmhmm, they sure were." Hopper put out his cigarette and threw it somewhere in the yard. He clasped Steve's shoulder with a heavy hand and softly squeezed it. He looked at Steve almost proudly, almost fatherly. "I am glad too. That you're staying here. And I even think you might actually be a little bit more useful than the poor excuses of your colleagues."

"Thanks," the new Hawkins police officer murmured, as he watched Hopper return to the house.

"I'm glad I stayed too."

## Notes for the Chapter:

hope you enjoyed it!

if you wanna, y'all can find me on [tumblr](#) :3

come talk, i don't bite (hard)

### 3. There's A Humming In The Restless Autumn Air

After the welcome back party, Steve offered to take Dustin home. The car ride was quieter; it seemed like the younger boy had ran out of questions. And yet, the silence wasn't awkward, just comfortable. Radio filled the inside of the car and both teenagers felt fine with just the presence of each other. When they reached Dustin's home and he turned around to say goodbye, Steve lifted a hand to stop him and turned to look for something on his backseat.

"So, I got you a present. A sort of *I'm sorry I was gone for so long* and *good luck in high school* present all at once," as Steve pulled a big plastic box to his lap, he smiled at Dustin's surprised face. "And I'm sure the ladies and cats will appreciate this one."

When the younger boy took a peek inside the box, he couldn't contain his excitement.

"Oh my God, Steve! I can't believe... Is... this a leopard gecko?" He almost screamed with joy, looking up at Steve with glee in his eyes.

"Sure is, buddy. All yours. Take good care of him, aye?"

"Ooooh, Steve," Dustin almost had tears of running down his face. "It's so cute."

"It... really is," Steve laughed. "Oh, I almost forgot," he suddenly pulled out a book too, titled *The Leopard Gecko Manual*. "Here. Please stop stealing books from the library."

"Sorry," sheepishly smiling, Dustin put the gecko back into the box.

"I think I'm gonna call him Aramis."

"Okay. Sure, you do that."

Steve waved goodbye as he watched Dustin take the box with the book on top home. He waited till the door closed behind the boy's back and then drove off home.

During the last period on Friday, while the teacher shortly was out of class, Max had turned around and bluntly asked: "Do you wanna go to a double date?"

"A double... date?" El repeated slowly.

"Yeah, it's, um, it's like a date but there are two couples? Like, me with Lucas and you with Mike? And we just, hang out, have fun, you know?"

"Yes," El did know. She and Mike had only been on one date so far, since Hopper wasn't too keen on letting her go somewhere alone or

with only one person but she was excited for more.

"And I thought, maybe we could go to the arcade?"

"The video game machine place?" Max nodded vigorously while El was slowly contemplating the idea. "I've never been there."

"Oh, so it will definitely be fun! We can teach you everything, just bring some quarters."

"Quarters?" El questioned just as the teacher came back to the classroom.

"We're thinking tomorrow," Max quickly whispered. "Ask Hopper and then tell Mike so he can let us know."

She turned around before El could agree.

*Now's as good time as ever*, El thought, sitting in Hopper's car on their way home from Steve's welcome party, so she went for a blunt "I wanna go to the arcade tomorrow."

"To the *arcade*?" Hopper questioned, glancing at her. "What's there?"

"Mike, Max and Lucas want to go on a double date."

"Oohkay," he brushed the tip of his nose with his hand. He always did that when he was thinking. "And how long do you think this date will take?"

"Is an hour good?"

"Yeah, okay, I think we can do an hour. But I'll stay in the parking lot."

El nodded, a big smile already on her face. As she looked through the window at the passing trees, out of the corner of her eye she could see Hopper smiling too.

When they got home, she quietly radioed Mike. They decided to meet near the arcade at one o'clock. He was excited, El could hear it in his voice. And if she closed her eyes real tight, she could even see his smile in her head. She imagined Mike's face a lot when they talked through their walkie-talkies. She wondered if eventually they'd be able to talk in the void too. Then they could have secret meetings there, like little dates, even when far apart.

But Hopper told her to not use her powers, so she only got to practice very rarely, when she was alone at home. Especially now that school started and her friends were allowed to visit her, it was very uncommon for that to happen. And yet she took every moment she could - when Hopper would fall asleep watching movies or go out for a smoke, and nowadays she didn't even need the static to enter the void, though it still did help. Getting rid of the blindfold was her next

step; if El was in extreme distress, it kinda worked without it, but while the girl was calm and collected, using just her closed eyes was a bigger challenge than expected.

She practiced her powers in other ways too, using her telekinesis for tiny things, like picking up fallen things or changing the tv channel or while cooking. El still avoided Hopper's gaze when doing things like that, but all those little jobs came to her naturally. Maybe that just was her life. To be truthful, El quite enjoyed it. Most of the days she went to sleep happy and ready for tomorrow and today was no exception.

She'll have a great Saturday, she already knew.

Mike was nervously waiting for El in the arcade's parking lot, Lucas and Max right behind him. He wasn't sure if Hopper would let him take El out again and thought their chances to be higher if they were in a group. Surprisingly, it did work but he was still worried about her just not showing up. It was five minutes after one when El was finally here and Mike breathed a sigh of relief as she got out of the car.

"Sorry I'm late," she said to the group and Mike pulled her into a hug. With her warm hands around his waist and her gentle breath on his cheek, it was hard to move away, but he could see Hopper pulling into a parking space in front of them. So he squished El hard against himself, smirking at her little yelp and then let go. Lucas was looking at them with an amused expression, Max's hand in his. They both greeted El and, with Max leading the way, entered the arcade.

El was a quick learner. The first few minutes she struggled a bit, never have touched or even seen a video game before, but she had a lot of quarters and a lot of patience. The first game they showed her was *Pacman* since it was the first one to be free of people. As El slowly got into the controls and gameplay, with Mike's fingers affectionately drawing circles on her back, Max started looking around. She couldn't explain why but she felt *watched*.

"Whatcha you looking for?" Lucas leaned in closer to her, their hands still clasped together. They were a few steps away from the *Pacman* machine, watching the other couple from afar.

"Nothing," Max shook her head. She glanced at El and Mike, standing close together as he gave her some pointers and tips. It was... adorable, Max had to admit. Turning back at Lucas, she gave him a small kiss on the cheek. "It just feels like, I dunno. Someone was

looking at me?"

"Or were you just looking around for some free machines?" Lucas chuckled. "I'm sure we can leave the lovebirds for a bit and they won't even notice we're go-"

"*There!*" Max whisper-shouted to Lucas, her eyes glued to something over his left shoulder.

"What?" He glanced where his girlfriend seemed to be looking.

"See that older girl with dark hair? Red jacket?" She kept her voice low.

"Yeah. It does seem she's staring at Mike." Lucas pursed his mouth as he turned his gaze back to Max.

The redhead moved towards Mike, standing on the opposite side from El, dragging her boyfriend behind herself. She deemed herself hidden from the stranger and quietly whispered.

"Hey, don't be too obvious, but there's this girl staring at you from further down your left?"

"Huh?" Mike looked at Max weirdly.

"Just, check it out. Inconspicuously." Max nudged him with her elbow, a serious expression on her face.

"What's... inconnspicuously?" El turned to Mike, dying in the video game as she directed her attention to her boyfriend.

"It means secretly, in quiet," Mike said as he scouted through her curls to where the stalker was supposed to be. "Oh, I think she's my new neighbour," he turned back to Max, as El started up a new game.

"Maybe she just recognised me?"

"That's still a bit creepy, just staring at little boys," Lucas joked and Max snickered, even though her eyes stayed serious.

"Says the town's biggest stalker himself."

When Max peered back at Mike's new neighbour, she found her eyes staring right into hers. A shiver ran down her back and Max gripped Lucas' hand.

"Hey, will you two be mad if we go play a game ourselves?" she glanced towards Mike.

"Nah," he smiled and winked at them with a *have fun*.

The stalker started heading for the exit just as Max and Lucas moved away from their friends. Max felt her breath hitch when they walked right by each other and she could swear the girl's shoulder brushed against her back. Without looking back, Max rushed towards the first people-free machine, which just happened to be *Dragon's Lair*. It felt like a breath of fresh air when the arcade's door closed behind the



stalker's back.

"You ok?" Lucas rubbed his hand down her back.

"Yeah," she sighed, starting up the game. "I'm fine."

Hopper was leaning on his car, finishing his second cigarette. He should probably think about quitting, both for El and for himself, but the time just never seemed right. He inspected the surroundings. It was a quiet, cloudy autumn day, the town empty and calm. He enjoyed days like these.

The arcade's door swung open, attracting his attention, and a young teenager, clad in a red jacket, walked out. She looked around the half empty parking lot and as soon as she noticed Hopper, started moving in his direction.

Hopper took one last drag of his cigarette and threw it on the ground, putting it out with his right foot. When he lifted his head up, the teenager was standing nearby.

"Hey," she said in a sweet voice, her green eyes peering intensely at his. "I was wondering if you could point me towards the Radio Shack?"

"Of course," Hopper said, "If you follow the road behind me, it's right around the left corner. Are you new in town?"

"Sure am," she smiled at him, stretching her hand out for a shake.

"Ree. Ree Darlig. And thanks; the cops in the city were a bit less talkative."

"Jim Hopper," he shook Ree's hand. "Hope you'll like it here."

"Oh, I actually used to live here," Ree laughed as she started moving around Hopper's car. "Sadly, had to... *unexpectedly* move a few years ago. Well, see you around, chief!"

And with a wave of hand, she was off. Hopper pulled out another cigarette and contemplated a quick trip for some coffee when he saw the skies darken a bit.

As he closed his car door, the first rain droplets hit the ground.

## Notes for the Chapter:

Hope you enjoyed it!

(Gonna plug my [tumblr](#) again real quick ;)

## 4. We Are Slipping Off The Course That Was Prepared

That Saturday evening found Mike knocking on Nancy's door.

"Mike?" Nancy exclaimed as her brother entered. It had been a few weeks since her brother came to talk.

"Hey," he sat down on her bed, brows furrowed. "Um, you know our new neighbours?"

"Yeah?" Nancy moved next to him and crossed her legs.

"That girl of theirs was kind of staring at me while at the arcade," Mike glanced at Nancy, worry obvious in his eyes. "I don't know. Maybe she just recognized me. But... Max got really spooked, so..."

"She kinda was staring at me too, yesterday at school," her little brother looked at her with curiosity. "I thought the same thing as you, actually. And... Jonathan wasn't too into it either."

He hummed.

"Do you think she's one of *them*?"

"I doubt so. But um, I guess I could, I dunno, talk to her? See if she asks any strange questions and such."

"Yeah, that's probably all we can do," Mike sighed and leaned back on his elbows. Nancy suddenly giggled, gazing back at him.

"Does this town have to constantly have at least one stalker?"

"I guess towns just need to keep their creeper quota up," he joined his sister's giggles. "Otherwise they'd get a fine or something."

"So, tell me, how was your date?" Nancy kept the light hearted conversation flowing until the weird neighbour was out of his head. And so when Mike went to sleep, it was with a smile on his face and not a look of worry.

But Ree stayed on Nancy's mind. She was gonna get to the bottom of this.

Next morning Mike's radio woke him up with Will's excited "Guys! Guys!"

"What?" Mike and Lucas said at almost the same time.

"Mooooorning," Dustin joined them with a yawn.

"Today's the day! We're gonna be going to get the dog!" The joy in Will's voice was obvious.

It took Mike's sleepy mind a few moments to remember - almost a month ago Will's psychiatrist offered Byers a psychiatric service dog since he really didn't like therapy and his panic attacks and

nightmares persisted. It was an obvious choice between that and medicine, so they took up the offer. Will was incredibly excited about his new pet and sad at the same time; their old dog had disappeared, possibly with Demogorgon's influence. But this was something that could help him feel better and live his life to the fullest and all of his friends were happy for him. Totally not because there will be a dog with them at most times. Nope.

"Nice, dude!" Lucas' voice brought Mike back to the present.

"Yeah, totally tubular," Dusting giggled, making them all laugh.

"Oh, by the way, Mike?" Will attracted his attention again.

"Yeah?" he waited for the answer while putting on socks.

"Hopper's gonna join us and he asked if you could keep El company?"

Mike smiled. "Sure."

"Cool. See you all at my place in the evening?"

"Yeah," the boys answered in unison and Mike hopped down stairs to get some breakfast.

"I'm gonna spend the day at Will's," he told his mom, mouth full of pancakes.

"Don't speak while eating," his dad grumbled but Mike didn't pay any attention to Ted.

"Sure," Karen smiled. "Just do your homework, ok?"

"I will," Mike was already on his way back to his room to grab his backpack.

"And be home for dinner!" Mom shouted to Mike's back as he walked through the door.

"Ok! Bye!"

His goodbye was cut short by the door closing. As he pedaled his bike towards El's home, ideas for the Sunday filled his head. Obviously they'd do some work but he also thought about watching some movies. Maybe listening to some music. Maybe napping. Just the idea of existing near each other and talking about everything and nothing made Mike happy. The entire trip he was softly smiling.

When he dropped his bike near the house, Hopper was just walking out to have a smoke.

"Hey, kiddo," he gruffly said and ruffled Mike's hair, smirking at boy's attempts to comb his hair back. "We'll be gone for a few hours. Don't make a mess, ok?" he lit up his cigarette. "And eat something, preferably something that isn't Eggos. And study at least a bit."

"Ok," Mike almost added *dad* but stopped at the last second. His foot

tapped eagerly and Hopper glared at him for a second, before returning to his smirk.

“And don’t do dumb shit.”

“Promise,” Mike gave Hopper a small bashful smile.

“Good. See you later, kids!” He shouted back to the cabin, hearing El say something in return, and then turned to go. He clasped Mike’s shoulder for a moment while passing by and the boy was left alone in front of the cabin’s door. Slowly, he lifted his fist up and lightly knocked. The door opened to reveal El’s smiling face, with a dash of pink on her cheeks.

“Hey,” she said, slightly out of breath, dragging him in and slamming the door shut.

“Hi,” Mike answered, with a delighted look on his face. El gave him a light kiss on the cheek, before pulling him into a warm hug. He enveloped her in his arms and pressed his cheek to the side of her head. They might have been hugging for a few minutes or tenfold that but Mike didn’t care to move or let go. Having El - slightly smaller, warmer and softer than him - in his embrace was as close to heaven as it could get and he cherished every second. Only when El started to move away, he slightly pulled back, her hands moving from his neck to his shoulders.

“I missed you,” Mike whispered. They saw each other just yesterday, not even 24 hours ago, but she nodded back at him.

“I missed you too,” her voice was delicate, eyes full of affection. El slowly rose up on her tiptoes, tilting her chin upwards and closing her eyes at the same time. Mike closed his just as her lips touched him, as light as a feather. Almost out of instinct, his hands moved from her back to her sides, just as El pressed on. She smelled like vanilla and wood and he relished in the feeling of her soft lips. For a moment, he worried about his own being chapped but then he felt El smile.

Mike opened his eyes as they both took a step backwards. A slight blush stained her cheeks and he was sure there was a similar one on his.

“So,” Mike spoke quietly. “What do you wanna do?”

“Mmm, let’s study for now,” El took hold of his hand and pulled him towards the sofa. “Then we can eat.”

Their studying mostly consisted of reading books since they’ve done most of their homework at the library. El didn’t like reading alone, she preferred asking Mike’s or Hopper’s help with words she

struggled to understand. They explained it better than the dictionary. After an hour of leaning on each other while reading their respective novels, Mike felt the need to move. One of his legs had already fallen asleep, so he slowly shook it before standing up.

"Lunch?" El peered at him.

"Ok," Mike smiled. "What are we gonna have?"

"I could make some sandwiches," El exclaimed happily, getting up. When she got to the counter, two plates were already on in, with a bag of bread next to them.

"I'm jealous," Mike chuckled. "You just think about what you need to get and it's there before you're even near it."

El shrugged, opening the fridge and getting out the other ingredients.

"It's okay, I guess. Hopper doesn't like it when I do it. Calls me lazy."

"I bet," Mike leaned on the counter next to where she was making food. "Need some help?"

"Would you like some tea?" El glanced at him.

"Yeah, of course," he was already pulling out the cups.

They both did their thing quietly, their elbows sometimes touching, little affectionate looks shared between. When Mike finished pouring the hot water to the cups, El slowly and carefully lifted them over to the kitchen table. When they landed, not a single drop was wasted and she felt pride stir up in her chest.

*Way better than three days ago*, she thought and sat down in front of Mike.

"Okay, *that's* a nice perk right there," he beamed at her and tenderly brushed away the blood under her nose. "But we should eat."

"Yeah," El looked down at her sandwich, suddenly way less hungry. She forced herself to take at least a few bites. It was okay, not the best she ever tasted, but her cooking improved a lot since she started living with Hopper. At least this was edible. Mike, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy the food very much - he was done within a few minutes and now was carefully sipping the still hot tea.

"I wanna try something," El said bluntly, observing his face.

"Okay, what is it?" as he put his cup down, she stood up and pulled on his arm.

"Practice. Come here."

They sat down on the sofa, legs folded in front of them, looking into each others face.

"What are we doing?" Mike asked, watching her warily.

"I want to try talking in the void. It happened once but I could not do

it again. But, um, maybe if this time we both will try, it will work?" She looked at Mike hopefully, waiting for his confirmation. He thoughtfully nodded and she let out the breath she didn't even know was held.

"Do you need the static?" Mike asked and El shook her head as she took hold of his hand. His fingers, long and warm, fit like a puzzle between hers and gave her the confidence she needed. *If this works, we could meet in the void, whenever we want*, the girl reminded herself, breathing in deeply and calming her anxiety.

"I'll try it without the blindfold too, but I'm not too sure how well it might work."

"That's ok," Mike squeezed her hand. "We have time."

El closed her eyes, her boyfriend following shortly. Was he her boyfriend? They never had *the talk*. It didn't matter, El reminded herself. They can talk about that later.

One more deep breath and-

El opened her eyes to find the familiar darkness surrounding her. She looked around, trying to keep her breath calm and her thoughts collected. As El turned around, there was Mike, sitting on the ground, with his legs crossed and a peaceful expression on his face. She kneeled in front of him; the strange lack of colour making all his features appear even more sharply and she could make out every single freckle on his cheeks. Slowly, cautiously concentrating all of her thoughts in her right hand, she lifted it up and touched Mike's. Unlike other times when he went up in smoke and disappeared, this time he stayed. She could feel his skin, a bit colder than usual, her fingers a little more numb than in real world. But it was solid and she could feel it.

When El lifted her eyes up from Mike's palm, she found his stare fixated on her face, a slight smile on his lips.

"Hey," he whispered unexpectedly and El opened her eyes.

Mike's loving look met her again, this time in real world. It was weird, the contrast between real world Mike and void Mike. He looked absolutely the same, except for the colour, but the feeling he gave off was completely different.

"You did it," Mike breathed out and El frowned.

"Yes, but that wasn't enough."

"What do you mean, wasn't enough?" he looked so happy and proud and she was confused. It was barely a couple seconds, in no way

what she expected from herself.

"Hey," Mike whispered, his thumb swiping away the blood from her face. "It was pretty amazing, even if short. I never *was* in this... void thingie. And you brought me in, somehow."

"Maybe it's cause I was touching you?" El wondered out loud. "Let's try again, this time with more distance."

"Um, ok. But don't overwork yourself, ok?" Mike looked at her with concern, slowly scooting backwards. When his back hit the armrest and his knees were as far away from El's as they could be, he deemed it enough.

"I'm fine," she calmed him down. And she really was, her stamina quickly increasing with each day.

She bit her lip and nodded, then watched Mike close his eyes. Her gaze stayed on his face for a second; his expression so calm, like he was sleeping, so close yet so far, so lovely and dear to her. With that image burned in her memory, she closed her eyes and exhaled.

When El breathed in again, she was back. This time she didn't need to turn around, Mike was right in front of her, a few steps ahead. She closed the distance and kneeled down. Once again, she lifted her hand up but this time she brought it up higher, to his cheek. As her fingers, heavy with thought, touched his freckled skin, Mike slowly opened his eyes.

This time, he stayed quiet for a few moments too, moving his hand and lightly touching her other arm. El jumped a bit with contact, her fingers on his cheek pressing in harder, but her concentration stayed unfaltered.

"Ok," she breathed out anxiously. "We're here."

"We are," Mike smiled at her with pride. "You did it."

El let her hand fall down to her side and he moved his down her arm to the palm.

"This place is pretty cool," his eyes shined with excitement, glancing around, as El made herself comfortable on the ground. It wasn't hard, like sitting on a wooden floor, but slightly softer, more like carpet. She looked around too. The void was empty, its horizon hard to pinpoint. It was almost like it continued endlessly and at the same time just stopped existing at all where they didn't touch it.

"I've been thinking," Mike's gaze returned to her as she spoke. "If we would ever need to speak privately and we were far away, this could work very well."

"Yeah," his face held so much love for her, El felt like she was

floating away, only grounded where his hand held hers. "Or if we miss each other too much."

Now that they had this, nothing could truly separate them.

A couple hours later Hopper found the kids on the sofa, sitting with their legs intertwined, Mike's one hand over El's shoulders and the other held in hers, peacefully asleep, a mediocre soap opera on the tv. He felt himself smile at the adorableness and didn't care to wake them up. Instead, he made some coffee and sat down near them, turning on some sort of crime drama. After a couple hours though, as he almost fell asleep too, Hopper remembered that Mike doesn't actually live here and he probably needs to go home for dinner. And yet his heart protested with all its might as he shook the kids awake.

"Good morning," his hoarse voice woke El first; she jumped up so fast, as if they were doing something illegal, and made Mike open his eyes in her hurry. Hopper couldn't stop the gruff laugh from escaping. "Calm down, squirt. Everything's ok."

"What time is it?" Mike's voice was raspy with sleep as he yawned and stretched and rubbed his eyes.

"About half to six," Hopper looked at his watch and the boy jumped up with his words.

"Goddamit," his face scrunched up and he looked at El, who evidently was ready to just lay down right back and keep on sleeping.

"I gotta go, sorry."

"It's fine," El sleepily mumbled and hugged him quickly. God, that kid was growing fast, Hopper realised, as he was already much taller than El, with his long legs and lanky body. He didn't find it fun to think about children growing up, so he didn't and instead told Mike:

"Go home. You can see the dog tomorrow, it won't disappear anywhere."

"Yeah," Mike murmured and went for the door. "See you tomorrow, I guess."

"See you," El said back quietly, looking a lot more awake.

Hopper just waved the kid goodbye and watched as El used her powers to lock the door behind him. He didn't say anything about it, instead asking about dinner.

As she finished eating her mashed potatoes, El couldn't wait for nine thirty to come. That was the time they decided on for their first date



in the void.

When Mike got home, his mom was almost done with the dinner. He basically fell into his house, tripping over his own feet and was glad to notice he wasn't late.

"How was it, sweetie? Could you set the table?" his mom called out from the kitchen.

"It was okay, I guess," Mike answered, doing what she asked.

He might have been a bit faster to eat than usual but nobody seemed to notice. His whole family was lost in their own thoughts and he could not be happier. After he ate, the teenager basically flew up the stairs into his room. He looked at the clock; almost seven. There still were two hours left, what was he supposed to do? He couldn't just pace around his room for that long.

Then he remembered Will and ran back downstairs to find his radio.

"Geez, you're energetic today," Nancy murmured towards him as Mike ran past. He didn't care to answer.

Having found his radio, he apologized to his Will.

"It's okay," he could hear the smile in the other kid's voice. "Lucas couldn't make it either. I'd say that's good, poor puppy is already stressed out enough."

"What will you call him?" questioned Mike, finally calmer.

"Well, remember that movie we all went to see in the summer? I was thinking Marty."

"Ooooh," they loved the movie. "That's a strong name."

"Yeah," Will sounded satisfied. "I really think this was a good decision."

Mike hummed in agreement. His friend deserved some calm and happiness and love. And a lovely dog.

"How was your day?" Will decided to continue the convo, as if feeling his friend's want to stay on the line.

He was glad Will was his best friend, Mike decided, as he told him about his Sunday.

## Notes for the Chapter:

hope you liked it!

come chat with me on [my tumblr](#) ! :)

## 5. The Sun Still Shines Through The Clouds

El excused herself early that night and was ready for sleep at nine. At nine ten, Hopper came in to wish her a good night and she tried her best to look sleepy and tired but the moment he closed the door, she was wide awake. Her heart was beating so fast, it felt like it was gonna explode right out of her chest. El hoped that Hopper would fall asleep soon. She wasn't sure how he would react if he knew she was using her power, especially like this.

The little alarm clock she had in her room seemed to move slower and slower every time she looked at it, so El forced herself to just relax. Trying her best to keep collected, she tried out a mindfulness exercise Will showed her sometime in the summer. It would help him calm down after a stressful day or an anxiety attack, he explained.

Slowly El felt herself loosen up with every breath she took, her thoughts more at ease, almost like right before you fall asleep, but still alert and ready. When she looked at the clock again, it showed 9:29 and she took another deep breath. It was time.

Opening her eyes in the void she could see Mike, sitting cross legged in front of her, a mirror image of their last meeting. El sat down in front of him, poking his freckled cheek. He opened his eyes to El's smirking face.

"It worked," she exclaimed happily and Mike hugged her as she laughed joyfully.

"You did it," he looked just as happy as she felt and it seemed like the void was glowing with their glee.

They spent an hour or so just talking and holding hands, enjoying each other's company till they were too sleepy to even think.

When El woke up next morning, she found her hand too empty, the dreamy feel of the void date still in the back of her mind . If Hopper took notice of the dried blood under her nose as walked to the bathroom to wash her face, he stayed quiet about it.

In chemistry, the first period Nancy and Ree had together, she sat down next to the new girl. She hadn't said anything to Jonathan: knowing him, he would have protested her choice to talk to Ree more. But Nancy was a curious person and she needed to know.

"Morning," she leaned over to the girl.

"Hey," Ree looked at her, a sliver of suspicion in her gaze, as she pulled out her notebooks.

"So, how do you like it here?" Nancy moved her hair behind her ears, intensely staring at her neighbour.

"It's okay," she shrugged. "A lot more quiet than the city. Feels emptier too, I guess."

Nancy hummed. "Did anything good on the weekend?"

"Yeah, actually," Ree perked up suddenly, smirking at the other girl.

"Went to the arcade. I think I saw your brother with his friends there? His girlfriend's cute."

"Oh, she is," Nancy stammered but kept her face collected while her mind raced. She wasn't sure if Ree would say anything about Saturday but it seemed like she was wrong.

"I also met up with this cute guy on Sunday," Ree didn't stop there, still smirking knowingly. "Real cool, a brand new police officer. Name's Steve."

"You went on a date with *Steve*?" Nancy exclaimed just a tad too loud, earning a look from a few of her classmates. Her hands unintentionally clutched her jeans and Ree grinned at her like this was the reaction she waited for.

"Sure did. What a nice guy, isn't he? You know him?"

"You could say that," Nancy murmured, wondering why she reacted the way she did. It's not like she was *jealous* - her love for Jonathan was apparent and she wished for Steve to find happiness as well. And yet it felt like Ree was just doing this to rile her up, which was insane: they didn't even know each other before Friday! *I'm just overreacting a bit*, Nancy decided. Maybe she just hadn't moved on as fully as she thought she did.

"It's okay," Ree put a hand on her knee and the gaze she gave to Nancy seemed sympathetic. Did she really look so pitiful? "I promise to try to not hurt him."

The bell rang and Ree moved her hand away.

Nancy didn't spare her a glance throughout the day.

"I don't like that new girl," she declared to Jonathan as they ate lunch on his car. Ree was nowhere to be seen. Jonathan looked at her in confusion.

"Well that's a change of heart. What happened?"

"It's just... she gives off a bad vibe, ok? Mike saw her in the arcade on Saturday, staring at them like some sort of creep."

"She was doing the same thing to you on Friday and you just brushed it off," he lifted an eyebrow and took a sip of his soda.

"Yeah, but... this is different. He's my little brother," Nancy frowned. She was not too sure if she should tell her boyfriend about Steve. But they always told each other everything and it didn't seem fair to start hiding things now. Especially things connected to her ex. "She also went on a date with Steve," Nancy admitted wearily and Jonathan put a hand on her knee, gazing at her expectantly.

"It's not the date thing itself," she tried explaining, moving closer to him and leaning her head on his shoulder. "Just the way she said it. Like she did it just to see me react. I don't know."

He hummed.

"It feels like it's connected to me, everything that she's doing, but..." she sighed. "There's no reason why. Maybe I'm slowly going crazy."

"You're not," Jonathan comforted her, throwing an arm around her shoulders and hugging her closer.

"Promise me you will tell me if she talks to you," Nancy whispered into his neck and he kissed her head.

"Of course. There's no reason for me to hide that," he chuckled. "You know I love you. I'd never hurt you like that."

"I know, I know. It's just..." she felt tired and Jonathan was so warm.

"I love you too."

They shared a kiss. It was short and yet Nancy felt her whole body shiver, her heart beating twice as fast. As Jonathan pulled away and smiled at her with affection in his eyes, over his shoulder she noticed Ree standing in the far end of the parking lot. She smirked at Nancy and took a sip from her bottle, her eyes still fixated on her face.

As her boyfriend drew her attention back to himself, Nancy could feel the goosebumps on her arms.

"Hey," as soon as she came back from school, Nancy caught Mike's attention and pulled him into her room. "I wanna talk to you."

"Um, okay," her brother closed the door and looked at her with puzzlement on his face. "What's going on?"

"That new girl," Nancy sat down on her bed, Mike following her closely. "I want you and your friends to stay away from her."

"Why? I mean, I don't particularly wanna interact with her anyway, but," his sister looked agitated, brows furrowed and hands shaking anxiously. "Did she do something?"

"She..." Nancy sighed. "I just don't like the way she acts. Gives me a

real bad vibe. I don't know."

"Well, sometimes it's better to listen to your gut," Mike gave her slight smile and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "It can notice more than you think."

"I know. It's... I feel a bit crazy but I also don't want anything bad to happen to you or El or... or any of your friends. So just keep away, ok?" Nancy returned his expression and bumped their heads lightly. "Just in case she is trouble."

"Yeah, okay, I'll try my best. But you know us," Mike laughed. "However fast we run, trouble just seems to follow."

Nancy nodded, the air in the room somber once more.

"I'm off to Will's," Mike stood up and moved towards the door. "Take care of yourself, ok? Drink some tea and try to relax. I'm sure everything will be okay."

"Yeah," his sister mumbled even though she was sure of the opposite.

Mike was incredibly excited to go to Will's to finally meet his new dog, his sister's warnings out of his head as soon as he got on the bike. They weren't sure yet if Marty would be allowed in school so for now he just accompanied Will outside of it. It was a pretty young German Shepherd - Mike was sure Joyce chose this breed for a reason - friendly and chipper, excited to meet new people and play. At first, he stayed closest to Will and seemed to try and barrier the boy from the kids he haven't met yet. Nonetheless, he warmed up to Mike and Lucas quickly and looked thrilled to get pets and kisses.

"He is the cutest thing I've ever seen," Lucas proclaimed, rubbing the puppy's belly.

"I don't know," Dustin answered. "Have you seen Aramis?"

"Who the *hell* is Aramis?" he turned to his friend with confusion.

"My pet gecko! I told you about him!" Dustin looked insulted by Lucas' question and Mike laughed.

"We haven't really seen him, Dustin," he reminded his curly haired friend who then exclaimed that they'll have to visit him tomorrow after school.

"Ugh. Besides, it's a gecko and this is a puppy," Lucas rolled his eyes, going back to petting Marty. The dog had a blissful expression on his face, his tongue out, with Lucas and Mike petting his belly and Will scratching his chin.

"Geckos can be cute," Dustin argued, pushing Lucas away and taking over his place. "You'll see."

“Rude,” the boy stood up and stretched. “I’m gonna go get a drink.”  
“Ok,” Mike nodded at him and when he walked away, turned his gaze towards the other guys. “I’m sure that both Marty and Aramis are really adorable. It doesn’t have to be a competition.”  
Dustin grinned at him. “You’re right. It’s not fair for these guys.”  
“Yeah, Marty would take all of the awards,” Will giggled at Mike’s exasperated face and Dustin soon joined him, followed by Mike’s little laugh.  
Marty barked too, joining them in their glee.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hope you enjoyed it!  
(Come talk to me at [my tumblr](#) :3 )

## 6. The Forecast Talked About Overcast Days

“Hey. Where’s Dustin?” Mike asked Will as he sat down in front of him, El right next to him, like always.

“Uh, don’t know? I think some teacher held him back for a bit,” Lucas answered before biting into his apple. Will looked around. Dustin being late for lunch? Talk about uncharacteristic. Suddenly Will’s gaze got caught on an older student by the door. She appeared to be staring at them and he moved on, not caring all that much anymore, getting used to the stares and the whispers; still, he was glad they seemed to calm down as time passed. But as he turned back to his friends, something just didn’t feel right and he realised she looked very similar to the arcade stalker girl Mike had described. He felt a shiver on his back, and when Will turned back, she was gone.

When the group walked back to their lockers, Mike’s sandwiched between El’s and Will’s, Will tapped the arm of the other boy.

“I think I saw her today,” he whispered to Mike, who just raised an eyebrow.

“What are you talking about?”

“During lunch. I thought she was looking at me but then I remember the stalker from the arcade. She had the same jacket.”

“Oh,” Mike frowned. “You sure?”

“Kinda small, dark hair, red jacket with white cuffs? Fits the description you gave me.” Even though Will was assured a just a few moments, now his resolve was wavering.

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, Nancy did say she was a student here...” Mike’s eyes widened and he cursed under his breath.

“What is it?” El asked him, coming to stand by his side.

“I think I saw her get out of Steve’s car today,” his brows furrowed and worry flooded his face. “But I completely forgot about it until now.”

“That’s weird.”

“What’s weird?” Will almost jumped out of his skin when Dustin appeared behind him.

“Where were you during lunch, dude?” Lucas and Max came to them as well, staring his friend down. “You’re not hiding another demo-dog, are you?”

“I’m not,” Dustin rolled his eyes. “I just had... stuff to do.”

"Ok, guys," Mike leaned in, his expression earnest. "Remember I told you about the girl in the arcade ogling us? I'm pretty sure she's been gawking at my sister this whole week. And today I saw Steve driving her to school. *And* she was staring at us again at lunch, according to Will."

"Kinda creepy," Max whispered, folding her hands on her chest. Lucas threw her a gaze.

"I don't know if it's connected to El or she's just a random stalker or it's all a coincidence, but I think we all should stay away from her," Mike took his time looking them all in the eye, his lips tight.

"Someone should ask Steve about it," Lucas offered and Mike nodded.

"I can do it!" Dustin smiled enthusiastically. Mike and El exchanged glances.

"Okay. Just... tell us what he said."

"Sure will," he nodded, a smile still on his lips. The group started moving to their classes and Mike tugged Dustin to the back of the pack.

"Tell me before anyone else, okay?" He stared to his friend's eyes/ Dustin nodded again, giving him a thumbs up.

"Do you think it's about me?" El asked Mike quietly, clutching his hand while they waited for Hopper in the parking lot.

"I don't know," Mike looked thoughtful. "I hope not. I *think* not."

He squeezed her hand with reassuring smile.

"Should we tell Hopper?" However reassuring Mike was, El still felt unrestful.

"Not yet. But... I don't think you should be out in the city while we're still figuring this out."

"Ok," El leaned her forehead on Mike's shoulder, loosely hugging him with her free hand. He petted her unruly hair.

"Though, we can still have our little dates in the void."

"Yes," she smiled and hugged him tighter.

"Welp, Hopper's here," Mike moved back and El gave him a little peck on the cheek.

"See you," she whispered and he smiled at her.

"See you."

Letting go of his hand was hard, but she knew Hopper would get impatient soon.

"Hey, kid. How was your day?" he asked El as she climbed into the car.



"The usual," she waved at Mike. Hopper glanced to the boy as he turned the car around.

"So, it's been a while. Is he being nice? Or do we need to have a talk?" He smirked at her annoyed expression.

"He's good. Leave him alone."

He just laughed. "I'm joking. We had the talk *months* ago."

"What!" El sputtered. "Ugh! You're such a *dad*."

Hopper laughed at her embarrassment and eventually her giggles joined him. He felt fondness fill up his chest, like it did every time she called him that.

It was nice to have a family again.

Steve was supposed to pick him up ten minutes ago and Dustin was getting a bit annoyed. They *were* supposed to meet after school - there was double date waiting for them at the ice cream parlour. Somehow, Steve found a couple of sisters that were the respectable age for both of them to date and Dustin was ready to learn from the best. He got really nervous as the date came closer and closer and so during the lunch break he visited the library, skimming through all the books about relationships he could find, a fact too embarrassing to disclose to his friends.

None of that would be needed if Steve wasn't gonna show up.

Finally, after almost 20 minutes of standing around in the parking lot, he saw a familiar car turn in.

"Where were you?" There was a shred of disappointment in Dustin's voice as he sat down next to his older friend.

"Hello," Steve raised an eyebrow at him. "I was a bit busier with work than I thought I would be. I'm sorry I'm late."

"Hmpf," Dustin pursed his lips. "Is the double date still on? Or have you already found *someone*?" *Fuck*. He didn't mean for that conversation to start like this.

"What are you talking about?" Steve quickly glanced at the teenager, almost instantly looking back at the road.

"The girl that got out of your car this morning." *Ah, fuck it, let's just go with it*. Dustin crossed his arms, glowering at Steve. "Don't deny, I saw."

"Oh, um, that was nothing," he gave a smile to his stare. "She's just an old friend."

"An old friend? Didn't she just move in?"

"How..." Steve's Adam's apple bobbed. Dustin's hands balled up into

fists. "Look... It's nothing, ok?"

"I don't think she's nothing. I think she's trouble, Steve. Don't be an idiot," he sighed. "And let me out."

"What?" Steve glanced at him and was met with a serious expression. "For real?"

"Yes. I don't really feel like doing dates anyway. And you can go back to making out with your *girlfriend*."

Steve stopped his car next to a curb and hit the steering wheel with open palms.

"She's not my girlfriend, ok?" His voice rose in volume with annoyance. "Ree just needed a ride and that's all what happened. I don't care about her nor do I care to hang out with her instead of you."

Dustin still glowered at Steve but his fists loosened up.

"Really?"

"Yes. Of course," Steve smiled at him. "And we don't have to go to that date. We could just get some fries and burgers at some diner, if you wanna."

"Okay," Dustin relaxed his face and Steve started up the car again. The teenager uncrossed his hands to fidget with the bottom of his shirt. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," his friend sighed, giving him a small smile. "I'm pretty sure I was a bigger brat when I was your age."

Dustin smiled at his friend. When Steve turned his head around taking notice of cars before turning into a road, he noticed a slight red mark poking out of his collar. Even though he was young, Dustin was aware of how hickeys look.

*"I don't care to hang out with her."* *What a son of a bitch*, he thought sadly, staring out the window.

On Thursday, Ree didn't show up to school. She's been giving Nancy weird looks and shivers since Monday and so she did her best to avoid her neighbour. But the moment the bell rang and the dark haired girl was nowhere to be seen, instead of relaxing, Nancy only felt herself stress out more. What was she up to? Where was she?

Nancy voiced her concerns to Jonathan over lunch, who gave her a weird look.

"You know, you're getting a bit obsessed with her, aren't you?"

There's a million reasons for Ree to skip school. Besides, shouldn't you be happy she's not here to stalk you?"

"I don't know," Nancy frowned. "It's just a bad feeling, I guess. Maybe I just feel better when I can see her stalking me. Or maybe I'm going insane."

She held his hand and drank her soda and tried to forget all about this. Jonathan must have been right.

At the same time in the other end of the school Dustin pulled Mike into an empty hallway.

"I talked to Steve yesterday," he whispered, carefully looking around until he was sure there was no one else present.

"And?" Mike pushed, eager to get information.

"He's lying to me. First, he was late, then he told me he knew nothing about her and that she's just an old friend."

"What?" Mike scrunched up his nose in confusion.

"I know, right?" Dustin exclaimed, gesticulating wildly. "When did she move in? Like three weeks ago? No one knew her!"

"That's... concerning," unease knit Mike's brows together. "Did he mention anything else?"

"Well, apparently her name is Ree? And I'm pretty sure she gave him a *hickey*."

"Do you think she knows?" Mike suddenly lifted his head, surprising Dustin. He continued after seeing his friends confusion. "That he and Nancy used to date. Maybe that's why she was interested in her."

"Yeah, okay, um, what about us?"

Mike shrugged.

"Steve could have said something about us."

"I don't like this," Dustin put his hand on Mike's shoulder. "We gotta tell someone."

"Well... what if Hopper pulls El out of school?" His eyes looked sad and conflicted. "And it's not like she's posing any danger to us. Maybe we are just paranoid after everything that happened. It could be nothing. Let's just... keep an eye on Ree and you should look out for Steve. And if she really is trouble, then we will tell. I promise."

"Okay. I'll trust you on this. Just..." Dustin sighed, patting his shoulder. "Just don't do what I did. Don't repeat the Dart incident."

They smiled at each other and parted ways. Dustin wasn't sure what he should say to the others; he knew Lucas would push for them to tell Hopper. He didn't know how Hopper react. He didn't know if this

would turn out good or bad or whether it even mattered at all. Dustin decided to keep his mouth shut for a couple days and stay sharp. And to take action if Mike wasn't willing.

Ree was in trouble. There were soldiers along the road to the lab and apparently Steve was too young of an officer to truly help her out. *All that work for nothing*, she snarkily thought. *I guess I could try out going around.*

From what she could gather there wasn't much protection of the forest fence but trying to break in in broad daylight would be a ballsy move that could backfire really fast. It won't do.

She decided to come back in the evening.

That Wednesday, Ree stumbled into the Upside Down, changing the course of everything for forever. While walking through the woods, she heard a clicking noise, like nothing she ever heard before. It captured her attention and she followed that sound to where she was met with an animal that didn't look normal nor real. It was around the size of a deer, a deep dark brown colour. It's head was shaped more like a horse's than a deer's, with pointy small ears, body and legs incredibly thin. It's fur seemed the wrong texture and there was something dripping from it, but in the moonlight Ree couldn't make out what it was. Guessing it was blood, she didn't dare to come closer, instead opting to hide behind a bush. It didn't have antlers and really, it could have just been fear and darkness messing with her head and all she saw was a normal deer - if that deer was terribly sick. But then the animal bent its head towards the grass and opened its mouth. It didn't seem to be like any other earthly animal's mouth: instead of its chin moving downwards and the mouth being horizontal, it seemed to be vertical, like an upside down flower opening its petals. It was so dark, and Ree wasn't completely sure, but it looked like that *thing* had tentacles instead of a normal tongue as she watched them curl around some grass, pulling it upwards to its face.

"*What the fuck,*" she whispered to herself, slowly trying to move closer from where she was hiding behind a bush and picking up a stick. Did the lab do experiments on animals as well? Was this their creation?

The deer-hybrid seemed to have heard her, its tiny ears moving around curiously. It let out the clicking sound again and started to move somewhere.

Ree followed it, a weird feeling tugging in her chest. Soon the creature came up to a big fallen tree. It went towards the tree's roots and as she followed it, was met with a weird smell, almost like of decaying flesh. When Ree turned the corner, the creature was gone and all she was met with was a weird pulsing tear in the tree's base. It seemed to ooze something and she could hear the same clicking sound coming from it. The smell and sight combined made her gag.

*"What the fucking fuck," Ree whispered, coming closer to inspect her find. Was it... alive? It had a disgusting pinkish colour, once again reminding her of the rotting flesh.*

Glad she was wearing gloves, she boldly stuck her fingers in and they seemed to tear through some weird membrane, coming free on the other side. Was it a sort of opening, like a door? *Is this where that creature went?*

She stuck her other hand in too, slowly pulling the membrane apart. Through the hole she made the other side was visible. And it wasn't the inside of the tree.

"What..." she didn't understand. Couldn't. Even though she could clearly see a forest right there, where there shouldn't be one. It was almost identical to the one on her side, and yet kinda different. Ree felt like it was pulling her closer, asking her to come in.

And so she gave in.

Slowly and carefully, Ree crawled through the "door" and stood up, shaking off the goop from herself as best as she could. The air appeared different in this weird version of the forest she was just in. She noticed weird spores floating around and pulled her scarf up to cover her mouth.

"What the fuck?" What was this place? How could it even exist? Was the lab responsible for this? So many questions were running through her head.

"Hello, human," she heard a voice, almost in her head but at the same time just above her right shoulder, like someone was whispering in her ear. She quickly turned around but was met with nothing.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you want?"

"I'm your new best friend, darling," the monotone voice continued. Ree couldn't have pinpointed what it sounded like, whether it was female or male, or, well, anything about it. It felt empty and cold and set off all her alarms. "And all I want is your help."

## Notes for the Chapter:

hope you liked it!

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